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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 005097

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: MANILA BOMBERS SENTENCED TO DEATH IN PHILIPPINE COURT

REF: MANILA 5021

1. This message is Sensitive but Unclassified. Please handle accordingly.

2. (SBU) Summary: Death sentences were handed down in a Philippine trial court on October 28 to three extremists for their role in the February 14, 2005, bombing of a passenger bus in Manila. Key to the prosecutors' case was the guilty plea by two defendants and testimony by a defendant-turned-state-witness. The speed of the trial and sentencing of the three were remarkable, especially given the normally ponderous nature of the Philippine judicial system. End Summary.

Abu Sayyaf Member Turns State Witness

3. (SBU) Indonesian Jemaah Islamiya (JI) member Rohmat Abdurrohman a.k.a. "Zaki," Rajah Solaiman Movement (RSM) member Angelo Trinidad, and Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) member Gamal Bahrani, were convicted and sentenced to death in a Philippine trial court on October 28 for their role in the February 14, 2005, bombing of a passenger bus that left four dead and over 60 wounded in the greater Manila area of Makati. Occurring simultaneously with this bombing were two other bombings in Davao and General Santos City, Mindanao, for which the ASG claimed responsibility (the bombings collectively are known as the "Valentine's Day Bombings"). (NOTE: All of the defendants in this case are on the U.S. Department of Defense Rewards List. The first reward of \$50,000 will be paid on November 9. Rewards for the remaining defendants will be paid by late November. END NOTE.)

4. (SBU) Philippine Department of Justice prosecutors won the convictions for multiple murder, murder, and frustrated murder largely due to the guilty plea of defendants Trinidad and Bahrani and the testimony of Gappal Bannah Asali a.k.a. "Boy Negro" -- an ASG member who turned state witness in exchange for immunity. Abdurrohman, who pled not guilty but admitted to having trained Trinidad, Bahrani, and Asali in Mindanao, is the first JI member convicted and sentenced to death in Philippine court. Each of these death sentences -- to be carried out by lethal injection -- will be reviewed by the Supreme Court. (NOTE: The only other JI member to have been convicted in the Philippines was Fathur Al-Ghozi -- a suspect in the December 2000 bombing of a suburban train in Manila. In April 2002, Al-Ghozi was sentenced to 17 years in prison for illegal possession of explosives and fraudulently obtaining false passports. After escaping from prison in July 2003, Al-Ghozi was killed in a firefight with Philippine security forces in North Cotabato Province, Mindanao. END NOTE.)

Convictions Follow "Big Catch" in Zamboanga

5. (SBU) The culmination of this five month trial came on the heels of the October 26 arrest of RSM founder/leader, Ahmad Santos a.k.a. Hilarion del Rosario, in Zamboanga City. Seized at Santos' safehouse were weapons, explosives, and maps of Manila (see RefTel).

6. (SBU) Santos -- described as a "big catch" by Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Southcom Commander Lt. Gen. Edilberto Adan -- was allegedly planning bomb attacks at the time of his arrest. Philippine authorities suspect that members of Santos' RSM were also involved in the February 2004 bombing of a ferry near Manila that left over 100 dead.

Comment:

7. (SBU) Philippine investigators and prosecutors -- who have long been hamstrung over the lack of an anti-terrorism law and criticized for the glacial pace of their judicial system -- have won a major victory with this case. The handing down of death sentences to three convicted terrorists -- including a JI member -- just eight months following the deadly February 2005 "Valentine's Day bombings" has sent the

message that it is not business as usual in the Philippines as related to such attacks. As for the death sentences, it appears unlikely that they will ever be carried out -- the death penalty is on the books but rarely utilized in the Philippines.

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